



Profile: Vali Nasr
State Department Scholar of the Muslim World

It was his first day on the job and already Dr. Vali Nasr was feeling the heat. “Write a memo,” Richard Holbrooke, the State Department’s Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, directed his new senior advisor, Dr. Nasr, following a meeting in which they’d just discussed the alarming advance of the Taliban in and beyond Pakistan’s Swat Valley.

“By when?” Dr. Nasr asked.

“Late tonight,” Mr. Holbrooke replied.

Dr. Nasr met his tight deadline and produced the memo, in which he expressed his view on the Taliban’s takeover of swaths of territory in Pakistan. The next afternoon, Mr. Holbrooke had copies of Dr. Nasr’s four-page memo in hand for his 3:45 meeting with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Secretary Clinton scanned its contents while standing just outside the Oval Office. Once inside, she gave copies to President Obama and his senior officials.

“The first memo I wrote went right to the President,” Dr. Nasr says with satisfaction of that day’s (and night’s) labors. And the President’s response? It was a vote of confidence. “I agree with Vali Nasr,” said President Obama, according to a *New Yorker* article that reported on Mr. Holbrooke and his newly assembled team of advisors, including Dr. Nasr’s first day on the job.

That auspicious beginning is one of many successes in Dr. Nasr’s scholarly career. The son of Iranian immigrants who lost everything after the fall of the Shah, he weathered those tumultuous times to become a prolific scholar, a best-selling author and a valued resource on the Muslim world to presidential administrations, policymakers, lawmakers, and his adopted country at large.

Before joining the State Department Dr. Nasr had already distinguished himself as a Professor and Associate Chair of Research at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey and more recently, as a Professor of International Politics at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy of Tufts University. He is also a life member of the Council on Foreign Relations, and senior fellow of the Dubai Initiative run by the Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. And while his academic articles have been widely translated and disseminated, he likewise has the facility for walking the general public through a thicket of complicated political and economic issues. He has therefore won himself a far wider audience, with opinion pieces in the most prominent newspapers and media appearances everywhere from *Meet the Press* to Jon Stewart's *Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* on the Comedy channel.

It was his stellar turn in book publishing that was particularly cited when Dr. Nasr was nominated to be a Carnegie Scholar by Alane Salierno Mason, senior editor at W.W. Norton, an independent book publisher. In her letter of nomination she wrote that W. W. Norton had been pleased to publish Dr. Nasr's book, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (W.W. Norton, 2006), because of Dr. Nasr's "depth of knowledge, clarity of thought, and eloquence of presentation."

From her perspective as his book editor, Alane Mason praised Dr. Nasr for his "enormous lucidity and purpose" and for his original thinking on the Middle East. Dr. Nasr looks at the region through "a new lens that transcends our nation's commonly held view, which always seems to focus our understanding of events in the Middle East on relations with the United States and Israel," she observed. And while this commonly-held view may neglect any comprehension of intra-Islamic history and politics, she noted that Dr. Nasr is capable of providing "urgently needed guidance as we tread the shaky ground of current affairs and cultural relations."

In his proposal seeking to become a Carnegie Scholar, Dr. Nasr said that he wanted to research and write a book that would gauge the prospects for democratization in the broader Muslim world. His stated purpose was to go beyond a snapshot of Muslim political preferences in order to track broader trends over time. "Such trends," Dr. Nasr wrote, "suggest the shape of things to come [in Muslim societies]."

Dr. Nasr's proposal was welcomed by Patricia Rosenfield, director of the Carnegie Corporation Scholars Program. By analyzing multiple cultural and political settings across the Muslim world for his Carnegie Corporation project, Dr. Nasr will "deepen understanding of the basic concepts and approaches to democracy," Rosenfield says. "He is shaping

a nuanced analysis that will be critically important for American foreign policy as well as public understanding.”

Carnegie Corporation’s Selection Committee likewise welcomed Dr. Nasr’s proposal. “Since ultimately the establishment of democracy in the Muslim world will depend on Muslims’ ability to translate this concept into their own cultural medium, the question of Islamic democracy is worthy of sustained study. This proposal can make a significant contribution,” one committee member wrote. “He challenges the conventional wisdom and has an impressive publishing record,” observed another. “He’s a real public scholar—practical, not ideological,” said a third.

Becoming a scholar was, in fact, something of a natural choice for Vali Nasr, given his family background. “My father spent time in America and went to school here,” he says of his scholarly legacy. Born in Tehran of a prominent family, his father, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, was sent to an American preparatory school and became the first Iranian undergraduate student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Seyyed Hossein Nasr stayed in this country for graduate studies also, earning a PhD in the history of science and learning at Harvard. But despite a job offer to teach at Harvard, he chose to return to Iran. By age 39, he’d been named president of Aryamehr University by the Shah. A year later, in 1972, another great honor: the Empress appointed him the first president of the Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy. He built a great library at this important new learning center and engaged the participation of distinguished scholars from both the East and the West.

Then, in 1979, everything turned upside down. The Shah was deposed. The Nasr family had to flee. “There was no going back to Iran. We were refugees of the revolution. We were uprooted. It was a very tough time,” Vali Nasr recalls. The family’s long, proud Iranian story had a sudden and painful end. Dr. Nasr’s grandfather had been educated in Europe, served as physician to the Iranian royal family, and worked to improve health care for average Iranians. His father had achieved swift and rarified success as an Iranian intellectual. But now Seyyed Hossein Nasr would have to reset his academic career in a country not his own. And his son, named Seyyed Vali Reza but known as Vali, would see his impending college plans upended virtually overnight.

Of that unsettling post-revolution period, Dr. Nasr observes, “It decided the way I was educated. I would have studied in England. I had already taken the Oxford and Cambridge exams. I wasn’t expecting to be here.” That challenging time is described by Dr. Nasr today as “very transformational” for himself and his family. “It put a lot of pressure on us to rescue our heritage, our religion,” he recalls. Some Americans sympathized with the Shah

and some did not, he observes. “We had lost our country and our standard of living. We were in a very lonely place.”

His immediate family, including his mother, father and younger sister, left many relatives behind in Iran when they emigrated. Some of their kin eventually settled in Europe. Others have since died. “There are only a few relatives there now,” Dr. Nasr says. “That connection has whittled away.”

What helped to keep the Nasrs moving through so much sadness and loss? “My father was at home in the West, and his opinions and advice were invaluable,” Dr. Nasr recalls. His familiarity with the U.S. was also helpful to his family and himself. With his strong academic credentials, Seyyed Hossein Nasr was able to land teaching positions first at the University of Utah, then at Temple University, and in 1984, at George Washington University, his academic home ever since.

“Because my father was a scholar, I inherited his love of learning and understood the importance of studying even the smallest details, minutiae. It was part of my early education,” Dr. Nasr reflects. And since he went to Tufts University as an undergraduate, he spent time in Boston, a dedicated college town with grand libraries and scholarly traditions. “I saw the world through the lens of academics. It was not out of the ballpark,” he adds lightly, “for me to become a scholar.”

Indeed, he was such a prodigy that he made an indelible impression on one of his professors as an undergraduate at Tufts University. “Except for Vali Nasr, I have never had another freshman tell me what books have recently been published and should be read,” recalls Dr. Leila Fawaz, who is herself a Carnegie Scholar of Islam, Class of 2008, and the Issam M. Fares Professor of Lebanese and Eastern Mediterranean Studies at Tufts. “There used to be a great bookstore in Harvard Square called Asian Books, which Vali seemed to check regularly,” Dr. Fawaz continues. “He was intellectually curious, *exceptionally* curious about all aspects of the modern Middle East, including the history and politics of the Semitic, Turkic, Persian and Urdu speaking worlds.”

Dr. Nasr counts Dr. Fawaz among the highly influential professors who mentored him and encouraged him to seek an academic career. So after graduating *summa cum laude* from Tufts in 1983 as a member of Phi Beta Kappa, he continued his studies at the same university’s Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, where he resumed working with Dr. Fawaz. “He was the best teaching assistant I ever had, brilliant at making complicated material accessible to a general audience, without sacrificing nuances or textured interpretations,” she recalls. “He did it with depth, great subtlety and a commitment to rising above the details—

which he mastered so well—to portray a broader comparative picture which put events in the Middle East in a larger framework.” That encyclopedic knowledge of the Middle East paved his way to a master’s degree in law and diplomacy from the Fletcher School in 1984. Then he headed to his father’s alma mater, MIT, to pursue a doctoral degree and research one of the oldest and most influential Islamic revival movements. “Those years,” observes Dr. Nasr, “made me an expert on political Islam and an expert on Pakistan.”

Dr. Nasr’s stellar record at MIT would forever raise the bar for his scholarly successors. Indeed, the caliber of his scholarship was such that his unique potential was unmistakable even then, says Dr. John Esposito, University Professor and Founding Director of the Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University. Dr. Esposito, himself the author of 35 books on Islam and another of Dr. Nasr’s influential mentors, was a member of his dissertation committee.

“Unlike any case I am aware of, Vali’s first-rate dissertation yielded *two* books,” notes Dr. Esposito. The books to which he refers are *The Vanguard of the Islamic Revolution: The Jama’at-I Islami of Pakistan* (University of California Press, 1994) a rare and welcome book-length investigation of an influential Islamic group; and *Mawdudi and the Making of Islamic Revivalism* (Oxford University Press, 1996), a carefully researched examination of the life and philosophy of one of the first and most important Islamic theological thinkers. Both volumes had Middle Eastern translations—the first book translated into Turkish and Urdu, the second into Turkish.

Showing all the signs of being a rising star, Dr. Nasr rocketed out of MIT’s Department of Political Science with his doctoral degree in 1991. “My dissertation was very well received and I published two books as a result,” he remembers. “MIT qualitatively changed my ability as a scholar. But it didn’t help me find a job!”

Just ahead of him, Dr. Nasr faced the young scholar’s typical challenge of trying to gain a foothold at the base of the academic mountain. He started teaching at a small college, the University of San Diego, as an assistant professor of political science in 1992. Then, reflecting his interest in public policy as well as Islamic studies, he changed jobs in 2003 and became professor of Middle East and South Asia Politics and associate chair of research, Department of National Security Affairs, at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California. Mandated by Congress just after World War II, the Naval Postgraduate School educates this country’s naval officers, offering them courses tailored to the direct needs of national and global security—needs which Dr. Nasr was well positioned to address. It was at that time that he also joined the Council on Foreign Relations as adjunct senior fellow for

the Middle East, and also became an advisor to government and business leaders, a frequent speaker at think tanks and a familiar voice in media.

Four years later, in 2007, Dr. Nasr heeded another call to be of service, this time to his alma mater. He responded by joining the faculty at Tufts' Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. The Fletcher School emphasizes policymaking and Dr. Nasr became its professor of international politics and associate director of the Fares Center of Eastern Mediterranean Studies. And until joining the State Department in the fall of 2009, he devoted much of his time and energy to working with his students there. For Dr. Nasr, coming home to Tufts and combining teaching and writing with public scholarship and policymaking has been consistent with his own stated commitment to "push the boundaries of knowledge."

Dr. Nasr notes that some of his university colleagues prefer to focus their efforts more singularly on their scholarly work and doing detailed, meticulous academic writing. "It's a personal choice," Dr. Nasr acknowledges. "Some don't enjoy policymaking or media interviews. They don't find those things as gratifying as focusing on scholarly work. As for himself, "I didn't begin as a public scholar. But now I think it's important for knowledge to get out there in a timely way. Otherwise, it is lost. There's a wealth of knowledge locked up in our universities. It is important for scholarship to flow into policymaking."

His two most recent books certainly fit that description by contributing to the flow of important ideas that can shape and change the nation's course. The first of the two, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (W.W. Norton, 2007), analyzes the mindset of the Shiite Muslims, who in recent years have become central players in the Middle East's power game, flexing their might at Israel, the U.S. and the Sunni Arab States. Dr. Nasr calls this trend the "Shiite revival," and his book goes far in explaining the ancient and inflammatory rift between the Shiites and another Muslim sect, the Sunnis. The rift began long ago, in 632 AD, the year the prophet Muhammad died. The Shiites began blaming the Sunnis for picking the wrong successor to Muhammad. Traditional Sunnis, for their part, began regarding Shiites as heretics with pagan beliefs. The fallout from many centuries of Sunni-Shiite enmity is most apparent in Iraq, according to Dr. Nasr. But his book predicts that more clashes between the two sects may inevitably be on their way. "In the coming years, Shiites and Sunnis will compete over power, first in Iraq but ultimately across the entire region," Dr. Nasr writes in *The Shia Revival*. "The overall Sunni-Shiite conflict will play a large role in defining the Middle East as a whole and shaping its relations with the outside world."

The Shia Revival became a *New York Times* best-seller, widely viewed as a groundbreaking book. Its original interpretation of Middle Eastern conflicts was praised, and its

fresh findings welcomed, by the media, citizens and statesmen alike. As a result of *The Shia Revival* Dr. Nasr headed a symposium on the “Emerging Shia Crescent” at the Council on Foreign Relations. He was profiled on the front page of *The Wall Street Journal*. And he was asked to testify several times before Congress, in the course of which he won himself some high-profile admirers.

Richard Land, a Southern Baptist leader and powerful conservative, was among them. “That was among the most coherent, in-depth and incisive discussions of the religious situation in the Middle East that I’ve heard in any setting,” he told Dr. Nasr in 2006, after meeting with him in a small group of academics and policymakers that was reported on by *The Wall Street Journal*. And there was similar praise from the other side of the political spectrum. Vice President Joseph Biden, who in 2006 was Senator Biden and the ranking Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, called Dr. Nasr’s testimony the most “concise and coherent” views on Iran he had ever heard. Foreign-policy aides from the Bush administration began attending Dr. Nasr’s speeches, and he was asked to brief President George W. Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Senator John Kerry read from *The Shia Revival* on the floor of the Senate as he explained the violence in Iraq to his colleagues, and recommended the book to leaders he met on his visits to the Middle East. The book would be read widely by world leaders and opinion makers, and would shape their understanding of the challenges they confronted in the Middle East. Dr. Nasr had arrived in Washington and *The Shia Revival* was his calling card.

Following the success of *The Shia Revival*, Dr. Nasr wanted to write another book, this time focusing on the phenomenon of Muslim democracy—and it was this project that ultimately received Corporation support through a Carnegie Scholars fellowship. “The findings of this project will provide a new approach to studying politics in the Muslim world,” Nasr predicted in his proposal to the Corporation. By broadening the debate on the future of democracy in the Muslim world, Dr. Nasr also saw himself aligning with the Corporation’s goals. “Carnegie Corporation is pushing us to think out of the box, get past stereotypes,” says Dr. Nasr, who was selected as one of its Scholars of Islam in 2006. And in fact, as his Corporation project deepened and ripened, he moved past the familiar ground of the cultural wars to new intellectual territory. “My focus began to shift,” he notes. Instead of accentuating the differences inherent in Muslim societies, he found common ground by identifying a burgeoning “critical middle” of highly modern Muslims who could transform their world the way the middle class has transformed the modern West.

Notably, Dr. Nasr’s focus on the Islamic middle class comes at a time when this

country's own middle class is losing ground. Lessons about the importance of middle-class vitality can therefore be applied in both places, here and in the Muslim world. "We associate stability and prosperity with the middle class," Dr. Nasr observes, "and that is true both here and there."

"Muslims are no different from other people," Dr. Nasr continues. "They're just in a different place economically." His focus on the Muslim middle class has taken his discussion of Islam and democracy in a new direction that resonates with great insight.

Dr. Nasr elaborates on his thesis with many compelling examples in *Forces of Fortune: The Rise of the New Muslim Middle Class and What It Will Mean for Our World* (Free Press, 2009), the book he wrote as a Carnegie Scholar. With the Corporation's support he was able to take leave from his teaching and administrative duties and do field work in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Turkey and, to a lesser extent, Egypt and Morocco. To his already deep understanding of Islamic history he added extensive on-the-ground reporting that allowed him to reveal a new and more capitalistic Muslim world, one that is sure to take many Westerners by surprise.

In this new world, Islam is a powerful supporter of the drive to modernity, and Muslims want heaven later—and wealth in the meantime, Dr. Nasr writes. He describes new classes and business elites that are "elbowing their way higher" and changing religious, social, and political life along the way.

Among the surprises: piety, of all things, is serving to drive consumption in the Middle East. Dr. Nasr offers a number of intriguing examples that bring his thesis to life. He describes the many ways that Muslims are demanding Islamic goods—"not just *halal* food and headscarves, but Islamic housing, banking, education, entertainment, media, consumer goods...and even vacations—Islamic cruises are a growth industry in Turkey."

Dr. Nasr cites Turkey as perhaps the best example of a Muslim country that has moved in the direction of having a stable middle class. The opening of Turkey to global markets, beginning in 1980, integrated it into the global economy. The result: A whole new generation of Turkish businessmen who are creating wealth and jobs in their country today. "The businessman is the change agent," Dr. Nasr declares. "The solution is globalization."

Turkey is not the only country in the Muslim world where capitalism is alive and thriving in the Middle East, according to Dr. Nasr. Nor is it the only place where Muslims are enjoying the effects of globalization. Iranians are Web- and mobile-savvy and Iran boasts the most bloggers per capita anywhere in the world. Beirut has glitzy malls full of shoppers buying the latest electronic equipment. And satellite television—280 channels

strong—can be found in any Arab city, pleasing the people and annoying the politicians and censors. There is even a boom in Islamic finance, which Dr. Nasr says is “integrating the economics of the Muslim world and the global economy.” The rise of a new business-minded middle class is building a vibrant new Muslim world economy, one that Dr. Nasr believes could ultimately transform the future of the Muslim world.

“It is a hopeful book,” Dr. Nasr says of *Forces of Fortune*. And although not everyone shares his optimism about the ability of capitalism to trump terrorism, a number of his book’s high-profile reviewers applaud his new way of thinking about Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates state of Dubai. “Vali Nasr masterfully articulates his argument through comprehensive research and vivid reporting. A must read,” said Senator John Kerry. “Take American chips away from the endlessly hypocritical and fruitless diplomatic games and rhetoric, our weakest hand, and put the chips on our strength—helping Middle Eastern and Muslim countries with economic growth. That’s the way to ultimately defeat the terrorists, build the middle classes, loosen ties to Arab autocrats, and develop democracies. That’s Vali Nasr’s brilliant message. It’s the only way to rescue U.S. foreign policy from disasters,” said Leslie Gelb, president emeritus of the Council on Foreign Relations, in an endorsement of the book that appears on the Council’s web site.

To those plaudits, add Dr. Nasr’s current role as Richard Holbrooke’s senior advisor and President Obama’s approbation of his first memo. These votes of confidence, along with his many scholarly and newsstand articles and media interviews with Charlie Rose, Anderson Cooper, Stephen Colbert and others, are among the frequent reminders of Dr. Nasr’s impact as a policymaker and public scholar.

“I’ve found a home in the State Department,” says Dr. Nasr, a statement that has poignancy for those who know of the loss of his Iranian homeland years ago. Colleagues familiar with Dr. Nasr’s American story say that he has adapted gracefully to the rhythms of life in this country.

“Vali has combined being an impressively productive and well-traveled scholar, a best-selling author, a professor at a distinguished university, and an advisor to Richard Holbrooke, with a full partnership with his wife and her career and the raising of their children,” says Georgetown’s Dr. Esposito.

“Vali succeeded by combining a natural talent to be a learned person with very hard work,” says Tufts’ Dr. Fawaz. “He inspired his students—and he also inspired his teachers—with his enthusiasm for learning, his creativity, and his grasp of the Islamic world from one end of it to the other.”